Shock and Awe

Laurier Rochon, 2011

Piet Zwart Institute – Networked media Programme

1. Preamble

If one considers any modern tragedy, our understanding of such an event refers to our experience in relation to it (mediated or not) and the proximity we feel to it. This event occurs at a given time, place, under specific conditions. The "tragedy of the Second World War" could effectively be understood as a notable event that will be remembered in history. Important to highlight is that some participated in the war directly, and others might have witnessed it fifty years after the fact via texts, images, movies, stories - the heart of the matter is that for both groups, some would consider this event a tragedy.

This linguistic use contrasts the idea of an Ancient Greek Tragedy, which enabled a particular mode of representation, a specific recollection of past events deemed "tragic": a mirror of reality. It was of the highest arts to create a scenario of rigorous credibility where the aim was to replicate "real life situations" as closely as possible by staging probable stories, often emulating an unfortunate turn of events during Ancient Greek times. This dual meaning of the term has survived this epoch, as it can still today echo stylistic concerns, theatrical considerations and "actual" events. Indeed, this dualism seems to illustrate all too well the problem of dissociating real-time events, their representational counterparts and the ensuing understanding we form of them. I will be studying, further in this essay, the apparent aims of Greek Tragedies, in the hopes of better understanding our own conception of its contemporary equivalent.

While it seems the effect of tragedies has been instrumental in shaping collective consciousness of Western civilization, its modes of representation have morphed dramatically since the original Greek Tragedy. This has conversely altered our relationship to pain and suffering, and contributed to expand the field of representation itself. Therefore, I ask the following questions : how does the modern tragedy unfold within contemporary culture? Furthermore, how can its rigid structure hold together given the fluid, asynchronous, decentralized properties of current era image publishing? How is the experience of pain and suffering constructed through visualization, and what power do they hold for and against us?

2. The Ancient Greek Tragedy

In his analysis of the Greek Tragedy, *Poetics*, Aristotle delineates didactically the boundaries of what constitutes the different gradients of successful Tragedies from a structural standpoint. His work reads like a handbook for Tragic Recipes, teasing apart one by one the elements which should be wished for, and should be avoided in such type of work. In his view, Poetry (which includes Tragedy and Comedy) can only be an imitation of men, who can either be represented as better or worse than in real life (Butcher, 1974, p.2), the former with Tragedy, the latter with Comedy. This binary view is consistent with the rest of his affirmations, laying out strict guidelines to follow in regards to the plot construction, characters, language used (and in what proportion), the inclusion of supernatural events and the emotions that each Tragedy should evoke in its audience's heart. According to Aristotle, these ingredients are vital to any great Tragedy, as they ensure such a high level of likeliness that it could be mistaken for one's painful truth. The significance of designing a "successful imitation" is highlighted by the following statement :

> Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; [...]. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.'" (Butcher, 1974, p.3)

The correlation here between "realness", pleasure and pain, is the act learning. Witnessing someone else's pain allows understanding, creates knowledge, and in turn generates pleasure. It also enables the destruction of our own fears as "Tragedy [...] is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; [...] through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Butcher, 1974, p.5). To achieve this effect convincingly, the poet must construct masterfully a plot, which is the soul if any Tragedy (Butcher, 1974, p.5). Contained within this plot is the reversal of fortune, the moment when the virtuous man suddenly finds himself in a situation where (ideally) everything goes down the drain. As much as possible, the Tragedy's architect should render this transformation seamlessly as a natural evolution of the plot : "The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design." (Butcher, 1974, p.8)

The entire *Poetics* is more or less of this flavor throughout, Aristotle trying to build a rigorous anthology of best practices for the construction of this art. Eventually, he makes an interesting

distinction between Tragedy and Epic Poetry (a poem, usually in written form) towards the end of the work, which will be useful in our scrutiny of contemporary representational devices and mediums later:

> Epic Poetry has one great advantage over the tragedy : it can carry many actions at once, which is not possible on the stage of a tragedy. [...] in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. The Epic has here an advantage, and one that conduces to grandeur of effect, to diverting the mind of the hearer, and relieving the story with varying episodes. (Butcher, 1974, p.20)

Nearly two thousand years later, Nietzsche tried to comprehend why the Greeks felt compelled to create such a thing as a Tragedy and how it has materialized into such an important art for them. In his view, it was an embodiment of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality, representing visual arts and music, dream and intoxication (Nietzsche, 2000, p.5). These two spheres merging into Tragedy was, according to him, a way for the Greeks to deal with the uneasing fact that life had an ecstatic, illusory aspect to it, but also a deeply tragic and painful counterpart - both of which were intrinsic to the experience of being. He continues by stating :

> How else could a people [the Greeks] so emotionally sensitive, so spontaneously desiring, so singularly capable of suffering, have been able to endure their existence, unless the same qualities, with a loftier glory flowing round them, manifested themselves in their gods [Apollo and Dionysus]. (Nietzsche, 2000, p.8)

He holds the Greeks in great esteem for the creation of the Tragedy and does not speculate they are trying to evade either Apollonian or Dionysian influence, but rather attempting to find the most fitting model for comprehending the difficulty to grasp life's meaning, the nothingness that results from the world's contradictory forces colliding at once, the complexity of a relational world perhaps beyond our understanding. (Nietzsche, 2000, p.9)

Nietzsche employs the word "illusion" to describe this feeling, which he believed to be inherent to all of our lives. Somehow, we are compelled to experience this illusion, and it constantly attempts to redeem itself through appearances for its ever-suffering and entirely contradictory nature. (Nietzsche, 2000, p.9)

He details :

But if we momentarily look away from our own reality, if we grasp our empirical existence and the world in general as an idea of the primordial oneness created in every moment, then we must now consider our dream as the illusion of an illusion, as well as an even higher fulfillment of the original hunger for illusion. (Nietzsche, 2000)

I believe Nietzsche was precise when describing the difficulty for Greeks to apprehend the wholeness of their world, as it entails certain ethical considerations and a more entangled position to defend, as I will explain in the the following part on Pain, Suffering and Mourning.

3. Pain, Suffering, Mourning

In Aristotle's Tragedy, the most important part of the play in respect to creating a truthful narrative was the plot. As it evolved, it would eventually lead to the "reversal of fortunes", the tragic event. This event was to be the "natural progression" of a sequential story, usually caused by a flaw in the principal character rather than by the interference of a supernatural phenomenon.

Interestingly enough, the narrative conception of a contemporary tragedy usually starts immediately with the tragic event, not the contextual frame of reference which led to it. If one was asked to describe the 9/11 tragedy today, it would be expected that the narrator starts the tale around the hijacking of planes, or their explosion as they hit the towers - not a deep analysis of biographical elements pertaining to the hijacker's early lives, or the ripple effects of US imperialism. This structural discrepancy mirroring our consideration of an event results in the "tragic moment" being pushed to the front of a story, following with the consequences stemming of this act. From a distance, this ideation appears slightly hypocritical and perhaps amnesiac unless we accept that consequential actions following a tragedy are unrelated to the causes of perhaps another one, if not many others.

Human pain and suffering constitutes such a fundamentally personal experience that dissociating it from our first-person view seems a difficult feat. In this respect, Judith Butler would argue that "isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events". (Butler, 2006, p.5) She militates for a much more comprehensive, contextual, global approach to understanding acts of violence and sees an immense opportunity in victims of violence to redefine themselves as part of a greater whole.

I will now take the opportunity to contextualize and elaborate my thoughts in the use of the terms "victims of violence". Pain and suffering is unfortunately impossible to avoid, if only because we cannot control the constellation of circumstances that dictate its distribution. However, there are radically different stratifications of wealth, power and control in our world, which enables particular groups to define, to a certain extent, who are the victims and the perpetrators of violent acts. An example could be linguistic manipulation, or to the ability of states to create ambiguous terms under which to consider detained prisoners, hence stripping them of all protection from international treaties and conventions (i.e. 'unlawful combatants'). Also under this category falls the use of terms to justify political and military retaliation in some context (i.e. "slaughter"), but refusing to admit its equivalence in similar situations when employed by other groups. This is indeed terminological imperialism, but similar feats can be accomplished by images, which will be covered in the last part of the essay.

Because wealthier, more powerful states can afford to carry out action towards whoever they have deemed "the others", a slanted view of who deserves to live and die, who should be commemorated and who shouldn't , which death is tragic and which one, forming the very definition of what the successful present-day tragic plot should consist of. Why is 9/11 a tragedy, and why is the invasion in Iraq, or Afghanistan not? Could the mechanisms of choosing who is worthy to die and who is not, the selective contextual amnesia and the imposable dominant grammar have anything to do with understanding the contemporary sequel to Aristotle's Tragic handbook?

Even before the bombs of our world's superpowers rip through foreign land, the lives that are to be taken have already been cast as unworthy, Butler would argue (Butler, 2006, 32). Often we hear that these occupied countries have either "deserved" or "asked for it", as this is retaliation for a tragedy like 9/11 - although she points out that subsequent bombings in retaliation are not a tragedy themselves. A simple demonstration of this unbalanced distribution of recognition can be observed by considering the inversely proportional amount of media coverage for deaths of American and European soldiers in relation to the casualties these same soldiers have caused.

If it is true that these lives do not deserve to be tragic, then it follows that we have no reason to remember them either, Butler continues. In *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a potent conception of grief that also somewhat aligns with Butler's idea of successful mourning: Aristotle suggested that the "realness" of the tragic gave rise to knowledge and understanding. Butler offered in *Precarious Life* that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation". (Butler, 2006, p.21) In this

light, it seems both authors agree on the transcendent quality of one's loss' impact on us. The necessity for mourning lies both in the recognition of the person that has been lost, but also in our capacity to reflect and act upon the changes we wish to operate in accordance with the acquisition of this newfound knowledge.

How then can we grieve, let alone mourn people that are deemed unworthy of remembrance, who are unrecognizable? If we cannot express our sadness for them, nor allow ourselves to be repositioned after our loss, how can the cycle ever be completed, how is moving forward even possible when faceless people are killed, and their ghosts cannot be mourned? (Butler, 2006, p.33) Military interference can be useful, even necessary under certain circumstances, but I find unreasonable to think that countries which are currently under political, economical and military pressure from "first-world countries" in the name of grief caused by suspected citizens of those said countries would ever drop their weapons unless at very least, the occupants show greater moral responsibility towards the lives that are taken. Expanding on his idea, Butler offers :

> We have to consider how the norm governing who will be a grievable human is circumscribed and produced in these acts of permissible and celebrated public grieving, how they sometimes operate in tandem with a prohibition on the public grieving of others' lives, and how this differential allocation of grief serves the derealizing aims of military violence. (Butler, 2006, p.37)

4. Deceptive Images

The modern theater of present-day tragedies takes place in images and the imagination of those who consume them. Photographs, cinema, online and televised news are just a few of tragedies' favorite vehicles to flock into people's minds. Images can foster reaction, response, discussion, or acknowledgement. But then what is the precise use of all this imagery? What kind of agency, if any, can the acknowledgement of such images create? Suzan Sontag goes a step further, asking if only people who have the power and ability to act upon horrific images should be allowed to see them. (Sontag, 2003, p.42) If the narrative puzzle is everything but complete in the visualization of a single photograph or video story, there seems to be no way around our personal edification of context around it. Perhaps there is value in the cumulative effect of such imagery, but what could it be? The standard quality for these images is their ability to shock, to move, to inspire and provoke. If most of the interpretive work happens during our internal rummaging, this accumulation would seem to strengthen our preconceptions, to mirror back our thoughts, opinion and biases onto the image, and

subsequently back onto ourselves.

To be successfully considered a tragedy, the reporting of an event must be visually shocking. As Sontag rightfully points out, an advertising from Paris Match announced : "The weight of words, the shock of images." (Sontag, 2003, p.23) It is the repulsion, the horror and the indignation that makes us react, doubt, understand. It is also what triggers empathy, and where our projections onto the image will be strongest. "The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or a proverb" (Sontag, 2003, p.22), it is a trigger, something we can attach instantly to a time, a place, a person. A seemingly great divide between the Ancient Tragedy and its contemporary equivalence in an event's representation, is that the artist "makes" the tragedy, builds it, writes it. On the other hand, the photographer, the cinematographer, the sound engineer (or the amateur) "takes" a picture, a video, or sound (Sontag, 2003, p.46). There is a disconnect where one implies the reenactment of something, an imitation, and the other suggests tapping directly into some form of reality. Looking at a picture that was "taken" from war, surely mediates our understanding differently than a drawing that was "made", representing the same moment. Or does it? As Sontag puts it, "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude" (Sontag, 2003, p.46). Maybe the conscious choices that seem to separate "making" and "taking" are not too far away from each other after all, and the idea of photographic imagery being 'real' is conceptually flawed and merely a construct derived from its medium.

After all, it has been verified that most of the iconic photographs taken from the Second World War were staged, and not actually taken in the midst of action. (Sontag, 2003, p.55) This deceptive facet of modern tragedies' images is, I believe, an important component of the the distribution of grief, pain and suffering which was tackled earlier – and interesting to consider in the light of the previous exploration on linguistic manipulation and selective grammar. It seems like this deceptiveness, the trickery, the illusion, is hardly avoidable, no matter how the tragedy is put out to us. Perhaps the staging of these images, their *mise en scene* is simply proof that emulating pain and suffering has not changed much from Aristotle's original Greek theater play after all.

5. Reference list

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